

Civic Agenda: New facilities needed to efficiently perform Whatcom County's business

By JACK LOUWS

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Next year Whatcom County government will be 160 years old, and over those years it has grown in response to the needs of its citizens. Most county residents utilize some part of our developed infrastructure every day without thinking about it. For example, the county owns and maintains close to 1,000 miles of roads, over 160 bridges, as well as fish passages, thousands of drains and culverts, and docks on both saltwater and freshwater. The county has also acquired close to 100 separate buildings ranging from the courthouse to smaller specialized facilities. Recently, I have proposed some changes to the configuration of our facilities that will accomplish some important public service objectives including providing cost-effective space for future operations.

These proposed changes will reduce the overall cost of our buildings and improve the efficiencies of the staff and programs that use them. Developing and building facilities and acquiring property can be an expensive and lengthy process, sometimes taking years to accomplish. Later this month the County Council will review and consider my proposed adjustments to our buildings and lands that will position our government to adequately respond to the needs and challenges of the future.

The changes I have proposed include the purchase of approximately 40 acres located at the intersection of LaBounty Road and Sunset Avenue in south Ferndale. The land would be used for future construction of a new consolidated main correctional facility designed to serve all of Whatcom County and its cities, as well as our tribal neighbors. The land would also provide permanent space for the facility needs of our sheriff's office. Based on the environmental assessment work we have completed thus far the 40-acre site will accommodate these proposed facilities. While the project would be constructed in multiple phases, it is anticipated that the initial phase would result in space for 521 inmate beds along with related correctional facility support operations. The funds needed for the property acquisition would come from existing county financial resources that have been saved over the past years and are especially designated for long-term capital and infrastructure programs. The type of voter-approved tax measure that would be appropriate to provide for the construction costs of the new jail and sheriff's facility will be decided by County Council following careful consideration of the options.

Some of our county buildings have now exceeded their useful life. In these cases, if they are to be used in the future they will require substantial investment in order to remain effective and healthy places to work. One example is the more than 100-year-old building at the intersection of Smith Road and Northwest Avenue, the "NW Annex" that currently houses the planning and development services staff and a portion of the staff from the public works department. I have

proposed to the council that these development-related departments move into a building at 1500 N. State Street in Bellingham that now houses part of our health department staff, the staff of the medical examiner's office and the county morgue. The county has been leasing about 80 percent of this building for county functions for many years.

This State Street building, after purchase and partial renovation, would become the location for all staff of planning and development services along with those involved with permitting from public works and the health department. My plan for the building would include continuation of the offices of the medical examiner and morgue within it. This will provide a true one-stop location for the permitting of residential and development projects in the unincorporated areas of our county. By acquiring the State Street building we can avoid spending millions of dollars rebuilding a dilapidated more than 100-year-old building. The NW Annex was never designed for long-term office space and does not meet the needs of modern business. The acquisition and planned renovation costs for the State Street building would come from non-general fund county sources designated for one time long-term infrastructure investments.

Earlier this year Bellingham Mayor Linville and I, along with Port of Bellingham Commissioners and Port Director Rob Fix, developed an agreement to jointly lease and occupy the now vacant Olympic Coordination Center located near the airport. In advance of the 2010 Olympics and Para Olympics in Vancouver, B.C., the federal government invested over \$3 million into this facility and it served the region as a joint emergency operations center. Our plan is to use this now-vacant facility to consolidate all emergency management, preparedness and response operations and staff. Within three years we also intend to consolidate all public safety dispatch centers and the 911 call center into this emergency operations center. The city, the county and the port are working in partnership with some of our major industrial neighbors, including BP and Phillips 66, to use the emergency operations center for a unique public/private partnership. Our plan for the emergency operations center is to develop the type of facility that can host large training exercises and prepare the most effective and robust response to natural disasters and major events that might potentially threaten the property and lives of our residents.

Lastly, the County Council has requested, and the legislature has approved, the addition of a fourth Superior Court judge for Whatcom County. This requires that we adjust the already crowded space in the courthouse to provide an additional courtroom and associated offices. The county intends to upgrade an existing commissioner courtroom for future service as a complete superior court courtroom.

My office, the superior court judges and other staff are working with architects to develop the most efficient design within the constraints of limited courthouse space. With County Council approval our plan is to have the new courtroom ready for business by the end of 2014.

It would be prudent for the county to move as quickly as possible to co-locate departments to save money, better utilize workspace and to potentially dispose of county facilities that are antiquated or no longer necessary for our operations. The need for careful management of the county government's assets has never been greater. Today's financial pressure necessitates creative initiatives that reduce cost and improve county services while building for future flexibility and emerging needs. I believe my proposals will do that, as well as bring county

services up-to-date with current technological advancements that allow for an increased ability to provide efficient services to our citizens and visitors.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This is one of a series of monthly Civic Agenda reports The Bellingham Herald invited Whatcom County Executive Jack Louws to provide to share updates about Whatcom County issues and projects. He invites citizens to contact him at 360-676-6717 or jlouws@co.whatcom.wa.us.

Read more here: <http://www.bellinghamherald.com/2013/11/17/3311685/civic-agenda-new-facilities-needed.html#storylink=cpy>